

Have Google and Facebook breached the privacy of their users?

Criterion	Marks available	Marks awarded
A: Focus and method	6	3
B: Knowledge and understanding in context	9	3
C: Critical thinking	12	8
D: Communication	3	2
E: Engagement and reflection	6	3
Total	36	19

Commentary

Criterion A: Focus and method

The issue and related ethical dilemma are clear and the response to it is relevant and focused. The sources selected by the student are appropriate but limited, with an overreliance on a single source and a tendency to quote documents at length, rather than more selectively. The ethical dilemma, contrasting the user's right to privacy with the service provider's need to generate profit and society's right to protection, is clearly identified and exemplified, but rarely developed (eg "This is very breaching of its users' privacy. However, if one is not doing anything wrong, then what is there to worry about?"). Overall, while the candidate clearly understanding the need to provide balance, there is relatively little evidence of explicit understanding of validity/bias issues (eg they do not question the provenance of the statistics quoted by the Privacy First founder).

Criterion B: Knowledge and understanding in context

Contrasting perspectives are straightforwardly presented and linked to specific examples. Knowledge and understanding of the dilemma is clear but underdeveloped, tending to present ideas/evidence rather than explore them (eg Google Streetview's alleged interception of wireless networks is quoted as an example of breach of privacy, but what information was gathered, for what purpose and what the consequences were is not considered). There is an understanding of the impact of the dilemma on community members, though at times this is presented as self-evident and asserted (...which is the issue the public has with them). However, overall the project provides a variety of relevant contexts relating to the dilemma are considered including legal ("It is said to have violated the US Wiretap Act"); law enforcement ("Facebook's extensive... technology for scanning postings and chats for criminal activity automatically flagged the conversation...") and commercial ("The services provided by Google and Facebook are free to use. Since users are not paying for services, they have to make their money somehow"). However, any attempt to link this to a cultural perspective (eg how far this tension between enterprise/wealth creation and the rights of consumers/users reflects issues around the price of a society built on free enterprise) is left implicit.

Criterion C: Critical thinking

A straightforward argument is presented logically with evidence being used to support, rather than develop, points made. Similarly, there is straightforward, but undeveloped, evidence of reasoning through linking ideas (eg. “Many individuals are suing Google for infringing on their privacy. This means that people are appalled by what Google has done, which, in turn, means that Google have pushed past the ethical boundaries of what people are willing to tolerate”). While sources are clearly credited, the candidate tends to use lengthy quotations to make points rather than the developing them themselves, which limits the evidence for analysis. Conclusions are logical and relevant, but relatively simple and brief (“All in all, anything inside of the programs is ethical, while anything outside of the programs is not”).

Criterion D: Communication

Generally clear communication with only occasional lapses. Structure simple but appropriate: subject-specific terminology used appropriately, but sometime not sufficiently well defined

Criterion E: Engagement and reflection

Through the reflections on planning and progress form and supervisor meetings, the candidate was able to make suggestions about how the research process could have been improved, mainly in relation to the range of source documents chosen, which was reflected in their final project. There was however more limited evidence of reflection in how the resources were used and integrated into the overall argument. During the final reflection meeting they were able to articulate a clear, if straightforward, understanding of the key issues and express a balanced personal view.